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THE ELIZABETHANS AND MR. SWINBURNE.

BY F. V. KEYS.

IN spite of the formidable bulk of commentary that four centuries of uninterrupted human reflection have accumulated about the name of Shakespeare, there is no figure in the republic of poetry before whom we maintain so persistently the attitude of interested inquiry. Names memorable and majestic appear in the annals of Shakespearian criticism. Yet their contributions propose and answer questions which, though interesting and important to them, hardly touch upon the problems with which our individual temper and time are most pressingly concerned. In other words, Shakespeare, like every other significant human phenomenon, must be interpreted afresh for each successive epoch of students; and to-day, more than ever before, it is to the study, minute and inspired, of the poet's age, of its spiritual values, that we look to give us again, in terms we can understand, his criticism upon that world, as re-created in his work.

It is only the reader unacquainted with the genius of Mr. Swinburne that will look for such a critical contribution in "The Age of Shakespeare," the latest volume of his re-edited works. A vast amount of admirable material is compressed within the covers of the book. It is, indeed, just this richness in knowledge, intimate and extensive, in enthusiastic appreciation, in power of splendid, imaginative expression, that awakens in the reader the livelier regret for the absence of the power of lucid synthesis which should inform with order this world, of a profusion, as it now stands, almost chaotic.

"Honest I can promise to be, but not impartial."

What Goethe's eminently penetrative and critical genius suggested as a warning, Mr. Swinburne flings as a challenge to his readers. His partialities have been his pride, and no less so the

unflinching directness of his honesty. With him, nothing in life or in art has ever been matter for suspension of judgment. He has had but a single verdict to give, the instantaneous one of the senses. Whether or no these are mediated by reason, is to him a matter of supreme insignificance. For any check on the rising tide of an emotional reaction he has only suspicion and contempt. To examine an emotion in the light of its causes and results, to discriminate in favor of this or that as furnishing finer and more enduring stuff for experience, would be for him a waste of time better employed in increasing the mass and variety of the weave. It is in the interest of an unimpeded manifold play of emotional reactions that he has discarded dogmas theological, political, social, and these he uses again as fuel to feed his fiery contempt, his resentful indignation. His generous temper, his robust humanity respond energetically to all the great emotional movements of his time, national and international, that make for freedom; for the sake of the variety and intensity he would prefer, one feels, a number of patriotic skirmishes before a single humanitarian march. To disease, when it comes his way, he reacts with an equal sympathy, provided always its manifestation is in the grand style. Mere intensity, mere energy is enough to extinguish for him the distinction between the normal and the pathological.

With so vast a temperament, so slight a perspective for values, Mr. Swinburne brings to the study of the Elizabethans both singular aptitudes and singular disabilities. He is akin to them by virtue of a deeper affinity than that of a poet for his fellow craftsmen, and his report of them is correspondingly enlightening and perplexing. It is, indeed, granted the change of phrase and emphasis inevitable after the lapse of three centuries, what might be, could they speak to us, their report of themselves. That it is couched in terms of "praise of dead men divine" is only another echo from the circle that never shunned hyperbole in its dedications.

That Mr. Swinburne approaches his subject in any but a "modern" spirit (either in the Elizabethan or Victorian sense of that word) is clear from the prefatory sonnet to the memory of Charles Lamb. Here once again the younger acknowledges his debt of gratitude to the elder critic by whose "grace" he himself first "communed with the gods" who trod the stage that

trembled beneath the footfall of their master. Wherever Mr. Swinburne permits himself to dissent from an estimate formulated by Lamb, he approaches nearer than did Elia to taking the Elizabethans at their own rating. So far as the purpose is concerned of achieving a reasoned estimate of this body of our literature, either as art, or as a human document, for aught one finds to the contrary in this volume, no single advance in man's knowledge of himself or of the universe about him need have taken place between the year 1808, when Lamb published his "Specimens" and notes, and the issue of these essays, the majority of which have appeared at intervals during the last thirty years. For purposes of literary comparison, which is fully and often most happily employed, English literature might have ceased at the date 1850, while Russia, Germany and Scandinavia might never have existed on the map of Europe. Eloquence is not more significant than these silences.

As a record of personal tastes and sympathies, Mr. Swinburne's contributions are alone worthy to take rank with Lamb's in the same field: no living writer on these dramatists has an equal claim upon the generous acknowledgment of younger readers, in whom a reperusal of these studies revives memories of eager gratitude to their robust, impetuous, imperious guide through what he himself describes as "this wildest and most fruitful province in the poetic empire of England." His contempt for "sciolists," his scorn for those who "trim the level flower-plots or preserve the domestic game of enclosed and ordered lowlands"; his flouting of "German" and academic "sagacity"; his hoaxing of the unwary who "flounder in the boggy and barren province of conjectural hypotheses"; his swift impatient correction of a printer's blunder that had escaped the duller eye of plodding editors; his humility of deference to what he recognized as genuine scholarship and acumen; all these were so many covert challenges to follow him where "the weeds and briars of the under-wood are but too likely to embarrass and offend the feet" of the timid sort of pedestrians. What matter that he dogmatized intolerably on that most debatable of all points, taste, bending to his own uses the vocabulary of criticism, to establish "irreversible" verdicts "for all time"? Against his temperament was pitted that of the reader, and if he dogmatized, it was because he knew and loved his subject, which gave him that note of au-

thority, "the soul," says Milton, "of all teaching." His tolerance, or even occasional commendation, of the intolerable, had its uses when weighed against the ignorance of those censors who "would bring upon our minds a famine again, when we shall know nothing but what is measured to us by their bushel."

Mr. Swinburne's method of literary portraiture is to return again and again to the picture on his easel, revealing with swift light touches the inward expressiveness of the features, their latent affinities and distinctions over against others of their kin. Constant *rapprochements* of one figure with another scatter happy and striking definitions of any single poet throughout the whole tract of this volume, as they extend beyond it through the series of as yet uncollected studies. The exquisite portrait of the muse of Dekker is placed beside that of Marston's, who "has not the gypsy brightness and vagrant charm of Dekker's, her wild soft glances and flashing smiles and fading traces of tears"—a passage that contains more of inspired truth and poetry than any or all of the series of stiff "Sonnets on English Dramatic Poets." Put beside this the rendering of "the man Dekker, of gentle, modest, shiftless and careless nature, irritable and placable, eager and unsteady, full of excitable kindness and deficient in strenuous principle; loving the art which he professionally followed, and enjoying the work which he occasionally neglected." The sympathetic unity of this double portrait of the poet and his art is no less than exquisite. Struck with fine firmness is the medal of Marston, "the friend and foe of Ben Jonson, the fierce and foul-mouthed satirist, the ambitious and overweening tragedian, the scornful and passionate humorist," and his muse, the "strong woman with fine irregular features, large and luminous eyes, broad intelligent forehead, eyebrows so thick and close together that detraction might call her beetle-browed, powerful mouth and chin, fine contralto voice (with an occasional stammer), expression alternately repellent and attractive, but always striking and sincere."

From the clash of extremes in judgments of detail there emerges a soundness of instinct that presides over the final ordering of these dramatists in their permanent ranks. It is this instinct that admits Dekker, with Shelley and Blake, into the choir where Shakespeare sings; that recognizes the affinity of Marston, in spite of his obvious propriety in "the regiment of which Jon-

son is colonel" with "that brighter and more famous one which has Webster among its captains, Dekker among its lieutenants, Heywood among its privates, and Shakespeare at its head"; and that assigns to Webster within that regiment the place closest to its chief.

Less convincing are the judgments that recognize in Middleton "the graver, loftier genius of a man worthy to hold his own beside all but the greatest of his age"; of Tourneur, that "more splendid success in pure dramatic dialogue has not been achieved by Shakespeare or by Webster than by Cyril Tourneur in his moments of happiest invention or purest inspiration." It is around such judgments as these last two, based on the scenes Mr. Swinburne sees fit to bring forward as his witnesses, that there closes in the real interest, the real question, for modern criticism, of these plays.

For a "splendid success" in pure dramatic dialogue involves more than that of the lyric, which like a wandering air, seals its perfection when it consummates the mood it stirs in the listener. Supreme dramatic dialogue justifies itself by the fact that it is proper, or rather inevitable, to the persons who voice it, at the precise moment when they do: and this again must justify itself by everything concerning the speakers which the dramatist has previously revealed. Of all this, again, we judge by referring it to our experience, of ourselves and of our fellows. Remote as this experience may be from the situations and the sufferings on the stage before us, it is yet the sole touchstone, and the one we constantly employ, to distinguish whether the humanity in the play is genuine or counterfeit. Of course this, true of serious drama only, is pre-eminently true of tragedy, and that for reasons too plain to require to be enumerated. It thus becomes impossible to rule out human fitness as a requisite of all great dramatic dialogue. Drama derives its being, as it borrows its name, from those deeds of men through which personality, character, plunges beyond the limits of the individual into the unsounded sea of multitudinous social reactions. The instant an audience or a reader perceives that the dramatist has tampered—to any end whatsoever—with the universal law, mysteriously latent, that governs man's conduct as immutably as any law that chains in sequence of effect and cause the universe about him, the pity and terror which only humanity

can evoke in humanity suffers a "chaotic extravagance of collapse."

The phrase is Mr. Swinburne's. It describes the catastrophe which "brings headlong to a close" a set of persons whom the dramatist could find no other means to dispose of. "Those," he says elsewhere, when deprecating the "promiscuous sweep of the drag-net of murder" at the close of another play, "those who object on principle to solution by massacre must object in consistency to the conclusions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*." He seems to overlook the fact that in neither of these plays is murder offered as a solution: they confront us with death as the ultimate enigma of life. But it is not at the close, it is in the very opening and in the critical midst of a play that the impudent hand of the mere marionettist is seen obtruding with what to the eye familiar with its manœuvres is the all but avowed object of securing a meretricious intensity of response at the theatrical "moment." It is this crime against what Mr. Swinburne justly points out as the sole virtue society at large demands from the artist—his artistic self-respect—which forever loses him the ungrudging ear of posterity. As instances of Elizabethan guilt we remember the obliging conversion of Bellafront, and perversion of Hippolyto, in the two parts of *The Honest Whore*; the sudden active depravity of Bianca in *Women Beware Women*, as unmotivated as the lie—monstrous in such a woman—of Lady Ager, upon which turn the "heroism" and "honor" of *A Fair Quarrel*: to Middleton also belongs the crime of subjecting to defilement a woman who is portrayed as driven to the extremity of murder no less by her abhorrence of an enforced marriage than by her passion for another lover. The atrocious ingenuity of cruelty that conceived and executed the main plot of *The Changeling* relegates it, notwithstanding Mr. Swinburne to the contrary, to the province of the student of human pathology.

How fatally this purely artistic defect in drama may play havoc with the purely human values (in drama they are indeed identical) is again strikingly shown when we turn to the "gentlemen" of Heywood's English tragedies. In *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, a no less impudent but more amusing device—that of suddenly vitalizing a waxen lay figure in order to have the pleasure of killing it—secures an affecting closing scene of domestic masculine magnanimity. For Mr.

Swinburne the character of Frankford dignifies the play with "mere moral power and charm." What, we ask, becomes of the nobility of a husband who prefers to condemn to the lingering death of a mitigated sort of solitary confinement, rather than to kill outright, a wife whose virtue has been sacrificed by the dramatist, without the slightest connivance on her part (Mr. Swinburne admits that "she is never really alive till on her death-bed"), in order to furnish this "gentleman" with an occasion adequate to prove his "kindness"? After Mr. Swinburne's awkward admission, one is baffled to understand J. A. Symonds's elaboration of comment on this scene: "Each question asked by Frankford is such as a *wronged husband* has a right to ask." Apart from the fact that it is Heywood, not Anne, to whom questions should be put, we may note in this comment an unpardonable solecism, which Symonds repeated after Heywood. A suspicion of legal taint spoils, for some readers, any relish for this play; such may catch the laughter of a certain comic muse, who, afar off, takes notes on egoists.

After such tampering with the law that weds character to act, what becomes of the "supreme dramatic dialogue" of the Elizabethans? Their spendid outbursts of "poetry," which render a mood with matchless imaginative power, are, dramatically speaking, but "hollow graves" whose "walls yield no echo" in human character. Such outbursts as Mr. Swinburne quotes in this volume frequently proceed, as he admits, from the lips of ruffians incapable of conceiving the meaning of the "lines" a hopelessly "undramatic" (in Hebbel's sense) genius compels them to utter. The lines

"O God! O God! that it were possible
To undo things done; to call back yesterday!
That Time could turn up his swift sandy glass
To untell the days, and to redeem the hours!"

do not belong in Heywood's world of "gentlemen"; but rather to that tragedy, blindly enacted at Cyprus, of the human heart betrayed. It is in the light of this contention that Mr. Swinburne's proof of the dramatic power of Tourneur must be scrutinized, no less than the Shakespearean scenes with which he sees fit to suggest, by comparison, Tourneur's possible superiority.

The splendor and the infamy of the really living figures of the Elizabethan stage,—whose perfect representative is the White

Devil herself,—lie in their mistaking for the human aim, the aim of blind Nature. “Nature’s aim is functioning: man’s is happiness.” With one exception, their dramatists followed the lead of Marlowe, not perceiving that Shakespeare had turned aside. Most of them never knew their mistake. Marston had intellect to grasp it negatively and caught therefrom inspiration sufficient to redeem, for all intelligent readers, the coarseness of his expression. Webster was great enough to feel it, and caught thence his dark despair. Not twice only, but thrice, does he express his sense of the “mist” that hangs about his “wretched eminent things.” With them he never tampered, leaving it to the blind forces he apprehended as at their work about them to destroy them by

“Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play.”

Surely this is Webster’s comment on *Othello*. He, no more than Shakespeare, ever thought of insulting his audience by offering such destruction as a solution. Shakespeare alone, by dint of sheer intellect and vast patience, worked out from experience itself the basis of a law of conduct at once natural and human. In him, for a time, thought itself was the supreme passion, and the object of that passion was man’s life. Sole of his age he saw himself, and his contemporaries, “not merely as they appeared to themselves, but as they appear to reason.” He alone felt, in Protestantism, not its protest only, but the affirmation which, as a theological movement, it was blinded to. In this sense, as Hebbel, writing in 1844, so justly contends, his drama stands alone with that of Athens in achieving the function of the “summit of the arts”: “to formulate for us the relation of man, and his social condition, to the Idea.” Whether, in this connection, Euripides “corrupted art by his sophistry as Socrates corrupted youth by his” is an opinion of Mr. Swinburne’s at least open to debate.

Among his Elizabethans, Mr. Swinburne stands like some Hebrew prophet of the Old Testament among his people, alternately tender and terrible, always in close touch with his race and age. Of the records of both peoples and epochs it may be remarked, for praise and dispraise, that they do not flatter mankind.

F. V. KEYS.